

# The Underground Man's philosophy. An analysis based on verbalisms from Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground Part I



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## **The Underground Man's philosophy**

***An analysis based on verbalisms from Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground Part I***

**Essay**

***Taking Humanism to Task: Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground and Nabokov's Lolita***

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**By**

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## The Underground Man's philosophy

The following essay is going to be an interpretative analysis of *Notes from Underground's* main characters views, based on the expressions used by the (so called) Underground Man himself. There are a few verbalisms, which have been selected in order to answer the main question of this paper: What is the Underground Man's philosophy and what might the author thereby be trying to tell us?

The expressions this paper is going to be concentrating on are the *real, normal man, consciousness, the laws of nature, the (stone) wall* and the *crystal palace*.

“The Underground Man carries on Dostoevsky's polemic: he discourses with a chilling frankness about human nature and history; he lashes out at the rationalists, the ‘stone wall,’ and the laws of nature“. (Jackson 2000, in Dostoevsky/Katz 1863/2000: 262)

What is the human nature as seen from the perspective of Dostoevsky's fictional character – the Underground Man? The “real, normal man” (Dostoyevsky 1864/1994/2011, part I, page 7), as the first-person narrator of *Notes from Underground* proclaims, is “ingenuous” (ibid.). *Ingenuous* –as translated by Pevear and Volokhonsky (which is the translation mainly cited in this paper)– in this case can be understood as *naïve* or *silly*, as well as *trusting*. Andrew Robert MacAndrew (cf. Dostoyevsky 1864/2004) translated the original Russian expression with *spontaneous* instead of *ingenuous*. This expression again could be a synonym for *instinctive*, whereby now the *real, normal man* –from the Underground Man's point of view– is pretty much characterized: This man is naïve and instinctive. Due to their *dullness* and *narrowmindedness* (I, 13) real, normal men are “active figure[s]” (ibid.), meaning “[...] they take the most immediate and secondary causes for the primary ones, and thus become convinced more quickly and easily than others that they have found an indisputable basis for their doings, and so they feel at ease [...]” (ibid.). And that is exactly what distinguishes his own being from the existence of normal men: There are no primary causes on which the Underground Man is able to rest on; he believes that he has no such bases (cf. ibid.). Therefore he is and has always been unable to act or even “become anything” (I, 2).

He refers to himself as the antithesis (cf. I, 3) of the normal man, “*l'homme de la nature et de la vérité*” (I, 8), the man of “his tender mother” (I, 7) nature and truth. J. R. Hall wrote in his article on the *Abstraction in Dostoyevsky's 'Notes from the Underground'* (1981) that “eighteenth-century thinkers in general recognized their concepts of *Natural Man* and *Natural Law*



for the abstractions that they were” (Hall 1981: 131), just like Rousseau. The Underground Man in Dostoevsky’s work, he continues, now takes this so called *Natural Man* for “the concrete actuality” (ibid. 132) and makes him the *real, normal man*. Thus –since Notes from Underground is a first-person narration written from the Underground Man’s perspective– these normal men become the “amorphous yet terrifying” (ibid.) “masses of ‘others’ pitted against

the helpless intellectual few” (ibid.), embodied by the Underground Man. Therefore the narrator characterizes himself as “more intelligent than everyone around” (I, 6/II, 46). What qualifies him as more intelligent is not least his propensity for doubting (cf. I, 8/14/29) or as he puts it: coming under the “cursed laws of consciousness” (I, 14). This is where the figurative and likewise concrete (*stone*) wall comes in. For the others –the real, normal men– or “*them*[(my italics),] a wall possesses something soothing, morally resolving and final, perhaps even something mystical” (I, 7). A wall is a concrete thing to *them*, something that stops *them* (cf. ibid.); while to the Underground Man it is just another deflection (cf. ibid.), something that raises questions. It is not automatically this “impossibility” (I, 9) which it might be for a real, normal man; An impossibility “they instantly resign themselves before [...]” (ibid.). To the Underground Man the wall itself is questionable.

This might be a metaphorical hint to every basis of every construction of thought, every persuasion, positing something fundamental that –itself (the foundation)– is questionable. Such as “the laws of nature, the conclusions of natural science, [or] mathematics. Once it’s proved to you, for example, that you descended from an ape, there’s no use making a wry face, just take it for what it is [...] go ahead and accept it, there’s nothing to be done, because two times two is – mathematics. Try objecting to that” (I, 9-10)<sup>1</sup>. To substantiate his allegation, the Underground Man continues with a –conjectured– direct response of one of these real, normal men: “‘you can’t rebel: it’s two times two is four! Nature doesn’t ask your permission; it doesn’t care about your wishes or whether you like its laws or not. You’re obliged to accept it as it is, and consequently all its results as well. And so a wall is indeed a wall ... etc., etc.’” (I, 10). He answers: “*My God* [(my italics) yet another questionable fundament of a persuasion], but what do I care about the laws of nature and arithmetic if for some reason these laws and two times two is four are not to my liking?” (ibid.). This attitude resembles David Hume’s mindset concerning a so-called moderate or rather *mitigated skepticism*: He wrote that empirical scientists (and you can generalize this for everyone) have to act according to the maxim

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<sup>1</sup> He is –of course– being sarcastic.

















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